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ABSTRACT

A survey of educational activities of adults in the United States was a component of the 1991 National Household Education Survey, a telephone survey of 12,568 adults. This survey found that 32 percent of adults, defined as persons aged 17 and over, were enrolled in a part-time educational activity over a 12-month period in 1990-91. Eleven percent of senior citizens participated in such educational activities. Most frequently, participants wanted to improve, advance, or keep up to date in their current jobs. Other reasons included personal enrichment, training for a new job, and obtaining a diploma or degree. The reasons cited depended on the participants' age, sex, race/ethnicity, and educational attainment. Young adults were more likely to participate to obtain a diploma or train for a new job. Men were more likely to enroll in courses to improve or update their work skills in their current jobs; women were likely to enroll in courses for personal, family, or social reasons. More Whites than Blacks or Hispanics took courses to improve skills in the workplace. Whites were more likely to enroll for a diploma or degree than Blacks and less likely to train for a new job or to enroll in basic skills than Hispanics. Adults with some postsecondary education were more likely to participate in adult education. (Three data tables and one figure illustrate participation rates and main reason for participating by age, sex, parental status, race/ethnicity, and educational attainment and standard errors for those participation rates.) (YLB)

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS

Statistics in Brief June 1993

# Adult Education: Main Reasons for Participating

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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"Adult education is a process whereby persons who no longer attend school on a regular, full-time basis (unless full-time programs are especially designed for adults) undertake sequential and organized activities with a conscious intention of bringing about changes in information, knowledge, understanding or skill, appreciation and attitudes; or for the purpose of identifying and solving personal and community problems."[1]

Adult education is a critical component of our educational system. It includes short-term training, seminars, workshops, or specific course work in an educational institution or in the workplace on a part-time basis[2]. These activities enable adults to acquire new knowledge and skills or update existing ones throughout their lives.

According to a recent national study, 32 percent of adults age 17 and over were enrolled in a part-time educational activity over a 12-month period in 1990-91[3]. Even among senior citizens, 11 percent participated in such educational activities, indicating that learning is a lifelong process.

Participants cited various reasons for participating in adult education. Most frequently, they wanted to improve, advance, or keep up-to-date in their current job. Others included personal enrichment, training for a new job, and obtaining a diploma or a degree. The reasons cited depended on the participants' age, sex, race-ethnicity, and educational attainment. For example, young adults were more likely than senior adults to participate in adult education to obtain a diploma or degree or to train for a new job.

These findings are from the survey of educational activities of adults in the United States, a component of the 1991 National Household Education Survey (NHES:91), administered by the National Center for

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Education Statistics (NCES), U.S. Department of Education. This survey, as described in the methodology section, has provided a rich database for examining adult education issues. In this report, adult education is defined as any part-time enrollment in any educational activity at any time in a 12-month period by individuals 17 years of age and older. As part of the report series on adult education, this analysis focuses on the extent of participation by main reasons. Results are highlighted below.

Forthcoming reports will discuss adult education participation by those employed and the type of job-related courses they took. They will also discuss providers, sources of support, and barriers to participation.

**Total Adult Population**

The participation rate is the ratio of the number of adult education participants to the corresponding non-institutionalized, civilian adult population. In NHES:91, each adult was asked whether he or she enrolled in any educational courses on a part-time basis. Each person gave detailed information on up to a maximum of four courses and a main reason for enrolling in each course.

In this report, a participation rate was calculated for each of the main reasons for participating. If a person gave the same reason for all courses, he or she was counted only once in the calculation of the participation rate for that reason. On the other hand, if a participant gave a different reason for each course, the person was counted in the calculation of the participation rate for each reason. Thus, the overall participation rate is not equal to the sum of the participation rates for main reasons.

Of the total adult population 17 years old and over, 32 percent enrolled in some kind of adult education during the 12 months preceding the survey in the spring of 1991[4].

Most people participated in adult education for job-related reasons. As shown in table 1, job improvement was the most frequently cited reason. Some 19 percent of the total adult population took at least one course to improve, advance, or keep up with their current job. This was followed by 10 percent who took at least one adult education course for personal, family, or social reasons. In addition, 4 percent indicated getting a diploma or degree as a main reason, and 3 percent indicated training for a new job.

As expected, participation rates differed by individual characteristics, including age, sex, race-ethnicity, and educational attainment. Any group differences cited in the text are statistically significant at the .05 level.

**Differences by Age**

Participation rates varied by age. As shown in table 1, the overall participation rates gradually increased from 28 percent for adults age 17 to 19 to 48 percent for those age 40 to 44 and then decreased to 11 percent for those 65 and older.

Similar to the overall participation rate, the rate for job improvement peaked during the mid-career of individuals (figure 1). The rates were 27 percent, 32 percent, and 28 percent for age 35 to 39, 40 to 44, and 45 to 49, respectively. The participation rate gradually declined after age 55 and dropped to 2 percent for 65 and older.

Data also show that younger adults, as expected, were more likely than older adults to participate in adult education for getting a diploma or a degree, to train for a new job or career, or to improve basic skills. As presented in table 1, 7 percent of adults age 17 to 19 participated in adult education to train for a new job as compared to 2 percent of adults age 55 to 59.

As for adult education classes to enhance personal, family, or social life, no clear differences among age groups emerged. The participation rates fluctuated between 7 and 14

percent. The participation rate for senior citizens (65 years and over) was still 8 percent.

### Differences by Sex and Parental Status

Even though there was no difference between men and women in their overall participation rates in adult education, men were more likely than women (21 vs. 17 percent) to enroll in courses to improve or update their work skills in their current jobs (table 2). However, women were more likely than men to enroll in courses for personal, family, or social reasons (11 vs. 8 percent) and for a degree or diploma (5 vs. 4 percent).

For both men and women, having their children under 16 living in the same household did not adversely affect their participation in adult education (table 2). In fact, adults with children under 16 had higher participation rates in adult education for the improvement and advancement in a job (28 vs. 17 percent for men and 21 vs. 15 percent for women). Similarly, females with children under 16 were more likely than those without children under 16 to enroll in a training program for a new job or career (4 vs. 3 percent).

### Differences by Race-ethnicity

One third (33 percent) of the white[5] adult population enrolled in adult education during the 12 months prior to spring 1991 (table 2). This was significantly higher than the 23 percent for blacks. The participation rate for Hispanics was 29 percent.

When it came to taking courses to improve skills in the workplace, the participation rates of whites was higher than blacks (20 vs. 12 percent) or Hispanics (20 vs. 14 percent). Additionally, whites were more likely to enroll for a diploma or degree than blacks. As expected, whites were less likely to train for a new job or to enroll in basic skills than Hispanics.

### Differences by Educational Attainment

In further analyzing the main reasons for participating in adult education, the participants were divided into two groups according to highest grade completed. The first group consisted of those who had completed a high school education or less, and the second group consisted of those who had completed at least one year of postsecondary education. Data clearly show that adults with some postsecondary education were more likely than adults with a high school education or less to participate in adult education (table 2). This is interesting because the education gap between the two groups was further increased. Adults who needed additional education most were the least likely to participate in adult education. Further studies are warranted to examine reasons for this phenomenon.

### Methodology and Data Reliability

NHES:91 is a telephone survey conducted by NCES. The survey is designed to be representative of all civilian, noninstitutionalized persons in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. The sample is selected using random-digit-dialing (RDD) methods, and data are collected using computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) technology.

NHES:91 included two survey components: an early childhood (EC) survey of children 2 to 9 years old and an adult education (AE) survey of persons 16 years of age and older. In this report, 16-year-olds were excluded from the analysis because traditionally adult education participants include only individuals who are 17 years old or older. Two different survey instruments were used to collect data for the adult education component. The first instrument, a household screener administered to an adult member of the household, was used to enumerate each adult over the age of 15, including those living away from home in school housing. The screener respondent was asked a series of items about each adult's educational participation over the past 12 months. Adults currently enrolled as full-

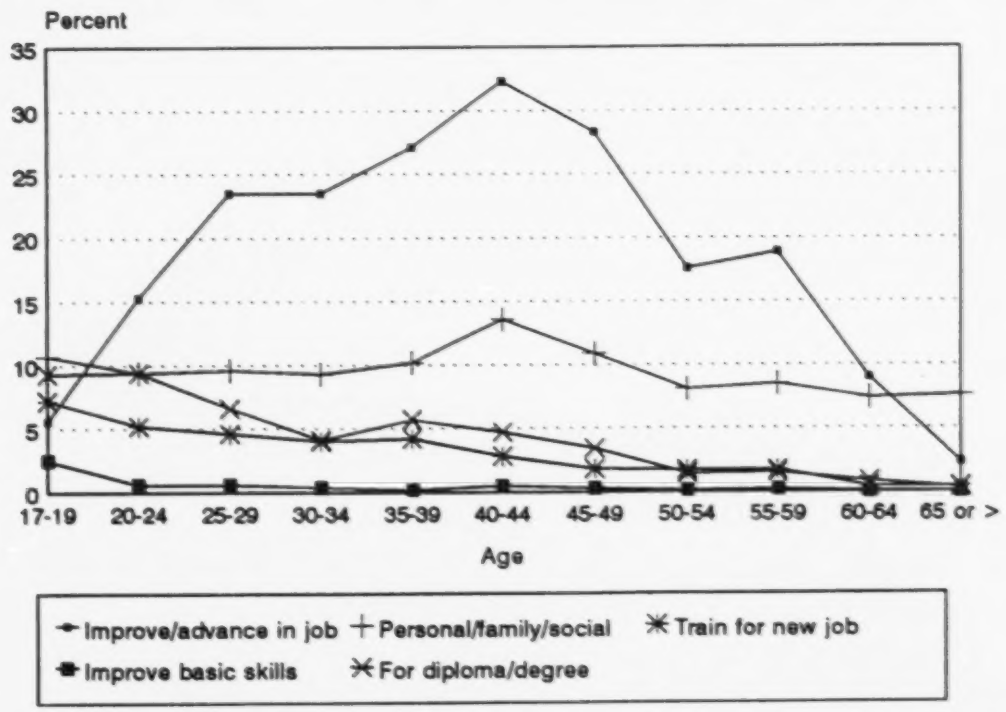
Table 1.—Participation rates in adult education and main reason for participating, by age: 1991

| Age | Total[1] | Improve/ advance in job | Personal/ family/ social | Train for new job | Improve basic skills | For diploma/ degree | Other | Un-known[2] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| TOTAL | 31.6 | 18.8 | 9.5 | 3.0 | 0.4 | 4.1 | 0.3 | 0.8 |
| 17-19 | 27.7 | 5.6 | 10.7 | 7.2 | 2.5 | 9.3 | 0.2 | 0.5 |
| 20-24 | 34.8 | 15.3 | 9.4 | 5.2 | 0.6 | 9.4 | 0.4 | 1.0 |
| 25-29 | 38.2 | 23.5 | 9.6 | 4.6 | 0.6 | 6.6 | 0.2 | 1.1 |
| 30-34 | 36.1 | 23.5 | 9.3 | 4.0 | 0.4 | 4.1 | 0.2 | 0.7 |
| 35-39 | 41.1 | 27.1 | 10.2 | 4.2 | 0.2 | 5.7 | 0.4 | 1.0 |
| 40-44 | 48.1 | 32.3 | 13.6 | 2.8 | 0.5 | 4.7 | 0.2 | 1.9 |
| 45-49 | 39.1 | 28.3 | 10.9 | 1.8 | 0.3 | 3.4 | 0.3 | 0.7 |
| 50-54 | 26.2 | 17.6 | 8.1 | 1.7 | 0.1 | 1.4 | 0.4 | 0.4 |
| 55-59 | 28.5 | 18.9 | 8.5 | 1.7 | 0.2 | 1.5 | 0.3 | 0.5 |
| 60-64 | 17.2 | 9.0 | 7.4 | 0.4 | (*) | 0.8 | (*) | 0.6 |
| 65 and older | 10.5 | 2.3 | 7.6 | 0.4 | (*) | 0.3 | 0.1 | 0.3 |

[1]Participants can be counted in more than one reason.
[2]This column represents participants who refused, did not know, or were not able to give a reason.
*Too few sample observations for a reliable estimate.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey, Adult Education Component, 1991.

Figure 1.—Participation rates in adult education and main reason for participating, by age: 1991




SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey, Adult Education Component, 1991.

full-time high school or elementary students were not sampled. Part-time AE participants were included with certainty, full-time students were sampled at a rate of 50 percent, and nonparticipants were sampled at a rate of about 8 percent.

The participation status determined from the screener was used for sampling purposes only. Once an adult was sampled for an interview, his or her interview responses rather than information provided in the screener were used to determine participation status. The interview, the second survey instrument, covered all forms of participation in educational activities over the 12 months prior to the interview. For part-time courses, some of the data collected were on types and sponsorship of courses, main reasons for enrolling, and benefits of and barriers to participation. Each participant was asked questions for each course, up to a maximum of four courses, attended during the previous 12 months.

**Response Rates**

In NHES:91, the household screener response rate was 81 percent. Based on the screener, a total of 14,226 adults were sampled. Of these, 32 were ineligible and 12,568 were interviewed. The weighted completion rate of the AE interview was 85 percent. The overall weighted response rate for the Adult Education Component was 69 percent (the product of the household screening response rate and the AE interview completion rate).

**Data Reliability**

Estimates produced using NHES:91 data are subject to two types of error: sampling and nonsampling. Sampling errors occur because the data are collected from a sample rather than a census of a population. Nonsampling error is the term used to describe variations in the estimates which may be caused by coverage, data collection, or data processing.

**Sampling Errors**

The sample of telephone households selected for NHES:91 is just one of many possible samples that could have been selected. Therefore, estimates produced from the NHES:91 sample may differ from estimates that would have been produced from other samples. This type of variability is called sampling error because it arises from using a sample of households with telephones rather than all households with telephones.

**Nonsampling Errors**

Nonsampling errors can be attributed to many sources, e.g, inability to obtain information about all cases in the sample, definitional difficulties, differences in the interpretation of questions, inability or unwillingness of the respondents to provide correct information, inability to recall information, errors made in processing the data, and errors made in estimating values for missing data.

In general, it is difficult to identify and estimate either the amount of nonsampling error or the bias caused by this error. However, in the NHES:91 survey, efforts were made to prevent nonsampling error from occurring and to compensate for it where possible. For instance, during the survey design phase, which entailed over 500 hours of CATI instrument testing and a pretest with over 200 households, efforts were made to check for consistency of interpretation of items and to eliminate ambiguity in items.

An important nonsampling error for a telephone survey is the failure to include persons who do not live in households with telephones. About 93 percent of all adults live in households with telephones. Estimation procedures were used to help reduce the bias in the estimates associated with adults who did not live in telephone households.

Standard errors for some of the major variables in this report are presented in table 3. These standard errors can be used to produce

Table 2.—Participation rates in adult education and main reason for participating, by sex, parental status, race-ethnicity and educational attainment: 1991

| Characteristic | Total[1] | Improve/ advance in job | Personal/ family/ social | Train for new job | Improve basic skills | For diploma/ degree | Other | Un-known[2] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| TOTAL | 31.6 | 18.8 | 9.5 | 3.0 | 0.4 | 4.1 | 0.3 | 0.8 |
| Sex | | | | | | | | |
| Male | 31.6 | 21.1 | 7.6 | 2.6 | 0.4 | 3.6 | 0.3 | 0.6 |
| With children under 16 | 36.7 | 27.6 | 6.6 | 3.2 | 0.4 | 3.3 | 0.2 | 0.6 |
| No children under 16 | 28.5 | 17.3 | 8.3 | 2.3 | 0.4 | 3.7 | 0.3 | 0.6 |
| Female | 31.6 | 17.0 | 11.0 | 3.3 | 0.4 | 4.6 | 0.2 | 1.0 |
| With children under 16 | 36.9 | 20.7 | 12.0 | 4.4 | 0.3 | 5.0 | 0.2 | 1.1 |
| No children under 16 | 28.2 | 14.7 | 10.4 | 2.5 | 0.4 | 4.3 | 0.3 | 0.9 |
| Race-ethnicity | | | | | | | | |
| White, non-Hispanic | 33.1 | 20.4 | 9.9 | 2.8 | 0.2 | 4.3 | 0.3 | 0.8 |
| Black, non-Hispanic | 22.8 | 12.1 | 6.8 | 3.2 | 0.7 | 3.0 | 0.2 | 0.9 |
| Hispanic | 29.2 | 14.1 | 8.9 | 4.8 | 1.2 | 3.5 | 0.3 | 0.8 |
| Educational attainment | | | | | | | | |
| High school or less | 19.3 | 9.9 | 6.1 | 2.5 | 0.5 | 2.0 | 0.1 | 0.4 |
| Some postsecondary education | 44.9 | 28.6 | 13.2 | 3.5 | 0.3 | 6.4 | 0.4 | 1.2 |

[1]Participants can be counted in more than one reason.
[2]This column represents participants who refused, did not know, or were not able to give a reason.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey, Adult Education Component, 1991.

confidence intervals. For example, an estimated 31.6 percent of adults participated in adult education in the 12 months prior to the survey. This figure has an estimated standard error of .77 percent. Therefore, the estimated 95 percent confidence interval for this statistic is approximately 30-33 percent (31.6 percent plus/minus 1.96 times .77).

All differences cited in the text of this report are significant at the 0.05 level. Where applicable, Bonferroni adjustments for multiple comparisons were used.

## ENDNOTES

[1]A.A. Liveright and N. Haygood, eds., The Exeter Papers (Boston: 1969), 8.

[2]It does not include full-time study in elementary or secondary school.

[3]U.S. Department of Education, National Household Education Survey (NHES:91).

[4]This rate is significantly different from the 14-percent rate in 1984 based on the Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. No definitive explanation for the difference is possible at this time because many potential factors may be involved. In addition to a possible increase in demand for adult education as a result of rapid changes in technology and the job market, there were many definition and procedural differences in data collection between CPS and NHES:91. Current data are insufficient to evaluate the impact of multiple potential factors. Thus, readers should exercise extreme caution in making comparisons and interpreting the difference.

[5]In this report, both white and black include only non-Hispanic.

Table 3.—Standard errors for participation rates in adult education and main reason for participating, by age, sex, parental status, race-ethnicity and educational attainment: 1991

| Characteristic | Total | Improve/ advance in job | Personal/ family/ social | Train for new job | Improve basic skills | For diploma/ degree | Other | Un-known[1] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| TOTAL | 0.79 | 0.59 | 0.44 | 0.19 | 0.04 | 0.18 | 0.03 | 0.07 |
| Age | | | | | | | | |
| 17-19 | 2.94 | 1.41 | 1.82 | 2.05 | 0.66 | 1.67 | 0.12 | 0.24 |
| 20-24 | 2.16 | 1.39 | 0.94 | 0.95 | 0.18 | 0.88 | 0.13 | 0.22 |
| 25-29 | 2.16 | 1.78 | 0.86 | 0.53 | 0.15 | 0.71 | 0.08 | 0.23 |
| 30-34 | 2.65 | 2.26 | 1.00 | 0.71 | 0.10 | 0.52 | 0.09 | 0.16 |
| 35-39 | 2.39 | 1.90 | 1.10 | 0.67 | 0.07 | 0.60 | 0.12 | 0.17 |
| 40-44 | 2.94 | 2.16 | 2.03 | 0.37 | 0.15 | 0.69 | 0.08 | 0.54 |
| 45-49 | 2.93 | 2.28 | 1.39 | 0.33 | 0.14 | 0.58 | 0.13 | 0.16 |
| 50-54 | 2.74 | 2.05 | 1.22 | 0.63 | 0.09 | 0.31 | 0.14 | 0.11 |
| 55-59 | 3.95 | 3.35 | 1.14 | 0.74 | 0.11 | 0.33 | 0.14 | 0.20 |
| 60-64 | 2.25 | 1.71 | 1.07 | 0.14 | low n | 0.21 | low n | 0.24 |
| 65 and older | 1.18 | 0.33 | 1.10 | 0.29 | low n | 0.08 | 0.05 | 0.09 |
| Sex | | | | | | | | |
| Male | 1.16 | 0.98 | 0.48 | 0.24 | 0.06 | 0.22 | 0.05 | 0.08 |
| With children under 16 | 2.86 | 2.27 | 0.84 | 0.58 | 0.10 | 0.41 | 0.08 | 0.17 |
| No children under 16 | 1.26 | 1.16 | 0.63 | 0.30 | 0.07 | 0.29 | 0.06 | 0.09 |
| Female | 0.99 | 0.68 | 0.63 | 0.29 | 0.06 | 0.27 | 0.04 | 0.12 |
| With children under 16 | 2.08 | 1.56 | 1.07 | 0.49 | 0.08 | 0.47 | 0.07 | 0.26 |
| No children under 16 | 1.08 | 0.73 | 0.65 | 0.34 | 0.10 | 0.31 | 0.05 | 0.10 |
| Race-ethnicity | | | | | | | | |
| White, non-Hispanic | 0.91 | 0.70 | 0.45 | 0.22 | 0.03 | 0.22 | 0.04 | 0.08 |
| Black, non-Hispanic | 2.12 | 1.62 | 0.91 | 0.42 | 0.24 | 0.45 | 0.08 | 0.19 |
| Hispanic | 3.04 | 2.11 | 1.55 | 0.78 | 0.27 | 0.47 | 0.13 | 0.24 |
| Educational attainment | | | | | | | | |
| High school or less | 0.95 | 0.64 | 0.57 | 0.28 | 0.06 | 0.16 | 0.03 | 0.06 |
| Some postsecondary education | 1.09 | 0.84 | 0.60 | 0.28 | 0.05 | 0.37 | 0.06 | 0.14 |

[1]This column represents participants who refused, did not know, or were not able to give a reason.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey, Adult Education Component, 1991.



*U.S. Government Printing Office: 1993 — 352-330